



5-2023

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Recommended Citation

McKamey, Caelan (2023) "Saint Monica's Model of Catholic Excellence in Augustine's *Confessions*," *Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Theological Studies*: Vol. 6: Iss. 1, Article 3.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/saysomethingtheological/vol6/iss1/3>

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Saint Monica's Model of Catholic Excellence in Augustine's *Confessions* By Caelan McKamey

Abstract: This paper discusses Saint Augustine's presentation of his mother, Monica, as a model Catholic throughout his *Confessions*. Saint Augustine utilized individuals he encountered throughout his life as models of perfect Catholicism in an effort to provide resources for his medieval contemporaries to draw from throughout their own faith journeys. As a convert himself, Augustine drew holy inspiration from his mother, Saint Monica, as he searched for life's purpose and God's grace. He presents his mother throughout the first nine books of the *Confessions* as a human woman – trapped in a loveless marriage, filled with anxiety and fear, yet above all, faithful. Augustine highlights that his mother, despite being a woman and 'humanly flawed', received divine visions and had a particularly beautiful relationship with her Creator. This is incredibly important to his contemporaries as it demonstrates not only human potential for closeness with God, but is the direct acknowledgement of a woman as inherently holy despite the patriarchal social and religious context of medieval times. Augustine presents his mother on a pedestal of exemplary Catholic behavior through his account of her visions, steadfast faith for his conversion, and her ability to change the hearts of women experiencing similar marital and societal strife. This paper's scope is the first nine books of the *Confessions* and the historical context during those decades of Augustine's life. This is an analysis of Augustine's beliefs and motivations as evident through this text as well as a discussion of the importance of female models throughout biblical history.

Keywords: Biblical Women, Saints, Faith by Imitation, Medieval Theology, Saint Augustine

The *Confessions* is a unique presentation of rhetoric: a philosophical and theological investigation built from the autobiography, prayer, and exegesis of St. Augustine. The first nine books chart Augustine's inner turmoil and discovery of God; ending in his conversion to Catholicism, these books serve as a model for 4th century Catholic Christian contemporaries as they navigate similar inquiries such as inner conflict and theological investigation. The *Confessions* was not only a platform to encourage a conversion of spirit and heart, but it offered detailed guidelines of how to do it. Augustine extrapolated from his lived experiences in a way readers could fit into their own spiritual journeys. As an artist of rhetoric, the circumstances and events presented are filtered through a lens of present needs and attitudes. One of these crucial needs is the conversion of his audience. His books offered concrete

Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies

Volume 6, Issue 1, May 2023

Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles



Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies

examples of his failures, catalyzed by sin, and his successes through his ultimate conversion with the direct result of presenting a timeline that resonated with his theologically hungry counterparts.

Although Augustine's *Confessions* is a text compiled from his own journey, he consistently recognizes the role mentors and Christian role models played in his success. Throughout his *Confessions*, Augustine calls to mind certain individuals he admired throughout his life as pillars of Christian excellence. He presents these models not only to outline his conversion story, but also to call his readers to follow suit. One of his most beloved role models is his mother, Monica. Augustine spared no "word that [his] mind could bring" regarding his mother. It is important to note that Augustine perceived his mother as a woman who was entirely devoted to her son and his salvation. While his witness is intimate and attentive, he is a man who claims no objectivity in his writing, and his perception presented is through a filtered lens¹. His presentation demonstrates a mother of fervent faith who had a strong influence on young Augustine. Her unconditional love despite his sin, her immense devotion and care, and her constant conversation with her Creator on his behalf propelled Augustine towards his conversion. These attributes are admirable; however, on their own, they do not demonstrate his understanding of her sanctity. This paper presents Monica as the Catholic model of excellence. The first way this is accomplished is by comparing how Augustine illustrates other individuals as pillars of Catholicism throughout his first nine books. The second way is by exploring Monica's personal experience as a woman plagued by anxiety, as well as a looking into her mystical visions which offered her divine reassurance. The third way will focus on Augustine's positive presentation of his mother and her position as an exemplary Catholic, particularly her constant faith in God and his delegates. Finally, as Augustine grapples with his mother's death, he ultimately presents her as the Catholic model of excellence

The first major component of Augustine's methodology in talking about the significant role his mother played is by discussing the importance of good friendships. The individuals Augustine references throughout his first nine books are carefully integrated to assist in the conversion of his contemporaries. He embraces his friendships throughout his writings to further explicate his views on the potential dangers in relationships; the possible beauties within authentic Catholic friendship; and the theology of sin, love, and faith. He gives timelines of fellow saints and individuals who followed a sanctifying life and showcases examples of conversion throughout his books.

In his early years, Augustine found himself struggling to avoid a life of sinfulness. His friends led him astray from the potential joy he could find in God and were acting in "barbarism or grammatical

¹ Clarissa W. Atkinson, "'Your Servant, My Mother': The Figure of St. Monica in the Ideology of Christian Motherhood," in *Immaculate and Powerful: The Female in Sacred Image and Social Reality*, eds. Clarissa W. Atkinson, Constance H. Buchanan, and Margaret R. Miles (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 140.

Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies

Volume 6, Issue 1, May 2023

Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles



solecism.”² However, he tells his God that those “men were held up as models for my imitation.”³ These individuals were who Augustine wanted to emulate due to the public “delight” and “praise” they experienced when resounding their ‘lusts’ with perfect rhetoric. They were unapologetically sinful, and Augustine lusted for their likeness, a sin he would later criticize. He utilizes these “barbaric” individuals in his first book as models of what not to be, and to showcase his downfall and the potential downfall of his contemporaries should they also lust to imitate sinners.

Augustine's use of negative imitation is limited when compared to the scope of conversion stories of ‘great men’ and saints present throughout the text. As Augustine grew older, he found himself surrounded by a “body of powerful friends”⁴ who followed Manichaeism. He desired to imitate them and their level of ambition in the pursuit of their faith. The questioning of his own level of ambition and dedication to the religion was sparked by his observation of these “great men, worthy of our imitation” who “gave themselves to the pursuit of wisdom.”⁵ Augustine desired to be like them: successful, ambitious, and fostering the pursuit of wisdom. This desire to imitate their commitment to the faith propelled his own devotion to Manichaeism. While this desire would later dwindle, the concept of finding role models does not. As the *Confessions* continue, Augustine’s confidence in his Manichean faith, a belief system he later condemned as heresy, collapses. The reader can then find Augustine’s examples of Catholic excellence as demonstrating grander acts for God. Augustine recalls the story of Victorinus, a man who gave up “his own school of words” rather than “[God’s] word,”⁶ and it was one that set Augustine “on fire to imitate him.”⁷ Augustine’s friend, Simplicianus, told him this story in the hopes that he would feel inspired by Victorinus’ faith. Augustine recalls that when he heard Victorinus’ story, he “longed for the same chance” to devote himself to God, “but was bound by the chains of [his] own will.”⁸ Augustine’s exposure to Victorinus set his heart on fire and opened his eyes to the inner will that was holding him back from conversion. He demonstrates how this one story of Catholic excellence and martyrdom catalyzed his spirit one step closer to conversion. This story is an example which showcases the importance that other Catholics played in encouraging Augustine’s conversion.

Augustine continues book eight by telling the story of Antony of Egypt and the influence he made on his companions’ conversions. While visiting with Simplicianus, he and his companions

² Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. F. J. Sheed (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2006), 1.18.28.

³ Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.18.28.

⁴ Augustine, 6.11.19.

⁵ Augustine, *Confessions*, 6.11.19.

⁶ Augustine, 8.5.10.

⁷ Augustine, 8.5.10.

⁸ Augustine, 8.5.10.



discovered a “small book that was written on the life of Antony.”⁹ Antony of Egypt was a hermit who withdrew into a life of solitude in the desert to engage in a life of prayer.¹⁰ As Augustine’s companion read the book, he “was changed inwardly, where [God] alone could see.”¹¹ Augustine is showcasing his friend’s change of heart, a change that only God could see. While his friend Alypius was reading, his “heart thus tossing on its own flood, at length he broke out in heavy weeping, saw the better way and chose it for his own.”¹² Alypius turned to Nebridius, a fellow companion, and challenged him to join his newly found mission: “If you have no will to imitate me, at least do not try to dissuade me.”¹³ Nebridius, too, decided to “remain his companion in so great service for such a great prize.”¹⁴ This anecdote displayed a commitment to God so powerful it inspired two men to become “great men” and sparked their conversion of heart. These stories of conversion are placed before Augustine’s own conversion with a purpose. He wanted to demonstrate the inspiration others’ conversion had on him and his success when he ultimately imitated their example by converting himself. Thus, imitation plays a crucial role in Augustine’s conversion, and he knows it is essential to convincing his contemporaries to explore their own conversion.

Augustine describes at length his mother’s personal experience with prayer and visions to arrive at the conclusion that she played a crucial role in his conversion. During his conversion journey, while struggling to find Catholicism and move away from the heretical Manichaeism, Monica consistently trusts in God. She was a model for a different type of imitation. While she was Catholic from birth, her resounding faith, despite her son’s tumultuous journey towards his own, was the foundation of the role she plays in the *Confessions*. Monica’s commitment to encouraging her son to find the true faith was presented as strong; however, Augustine displays her moments of anxiety and doubt towards his predestined conversion. While Augustine was a steadfast believer in Manichaeism, he recalled his mother’s intense feelings and the tension ever present in their relationship until his conversion.

From Augustine’s account, Monica’s entire life was dedicated to her son’s conversion. When he accepted a heretical faith as the truth, Monica’s heart was broken, and she felt that her son was lost indefinitely. Augustine recalls that due to “the faith and the spirit which she had from [God], she saw me as dead.”¹⁵ Monica’s faith in God and her understanding that Catholicism was the only true religion led

⁹ Augustine, 8.6.15

¹⁰ Augustine, 151, ft.

¹¹ Augustine, 8.6.15.

¹² Augustine, 8.6.15.

¹³ Augustine, 8.6.15.

¹⁴ Augustine, 8.6.15.

¹⁵ Augustine, *Confessions*, 3.11.19.



Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies

her to believe her son was spiritually dead. She was “mourning for the loss” of Augustine’s soul and was doubtful in God’s ability to guide Augustine down the correct path towards conversion. In Augustine’s theology, humans do not earn their salvation through their own merit, but through God’s grace.¹⁶ Augustine believes that his conversion was predestined by God; however, Monica did not understand this truth and doubted the future of his salvation. Her doubts are an example of the human condition, and Augustine does not refrain from presenting them to demonstrate that even a ‘perfect’ Catholic can have doubts.

God answers her concerns through dreams. God provided Monica with a vision showing her “grieving and heavy with her grief,” and “a youth all radiant coming to her cheerful and smiling.”¹⁷ God provided her with a dream that “comforted her that she consented to live with me,” which she had initially “refused to do because she detested the blasphemies of my error.”¹⁸ At one point, Monica was so steadfast in her belief that Augustine’s soul was destined for death due to his heretical beliefs that she had refused to engage with him while he pursued such a “blasphemous” life. Despite her doubts in God’s ability to guide Augustine down the righteous path, God did not abandon her and provided her with peace in knowing that her son will be saved. When Monica revealed the dream to Augustine, she said to him, “where you are, there I will be.” Monica’s response to Augustine demonstrates her own conversion of heart. While not a conversion of faith, as she was already devoutly Catholic, this inner conversion from doubt towards confidence in God’s plan is profound. Her ability to set aside her anxieties for her son’s soul is worthy of admiration.

Augustine himself was “deeply moved by that answer that [God] gave through [his] mother.”¹⁹ He was so astonished by her response that he believed it came from God’s mouth Himself. His display of a woman who God found worthy to speak through is the ultimate demonstration of her sanctity. She was a “chaste, god-fearing and sober widow”²⁰ that was a host for God’s divine intervention. While she was accomplished in her ability to trust God, she never “relaxed her weeping and mourning,” nor did she cease to “pray at every hour and bewail [her son] to [God].”²¹ Monica was determined to assist God in Augustine’s journey to salvation. She understood that God would not abandon her prayer. Augustine places this anecdote in his book to demonstrate that despite his mother’s anxieties, she persisted in

¹⁶ Kate Cooper, “Augustine and Monica,” in *Motherhood, Religion, and Society in Medieval Europe, 400-1400*, eds. Lesley Smith and Conrad Leyser (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2011).

¹⁷ Cooper, “Augustine and Monica.”

¹⁸ Cooper, “Augustine and Monica.”

¹⁹ Augustine, *Confessions*, 3.11.20.

²⁰ Augustine, 3.11.20.

²¹ Augustine, 3.11.20.

Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies

Volume 6, Issue 1, May 2023

Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles



prayer and sustained her faith. Augustine was allowed to “toss helplessly in that darkness”²² of Manichaeism not because of his mother’s or God’s neglect, but because it was all part of the journey.

Monica took her dream, newfound understanding in God’s plan, and anxieties to the bishop and delegate for God, Ambrose. She begged Ambrose to talk to Augustine with the hope that he would propel Augustine further along his journey. When Ambrose denied her and sent her away to live as “it is impossible that the son of these tears should perish,” she accepted the answer as if it had “sounded from heaven.” Augustine pointed to two important conclusions through this instance. The power of Monica’s tears was recognized by the Church in the person of the bishop who she turned to for comfort and advice.²³ Her son would be saved by her faith if not for the discovery of his own. This is an intense comfort to Monica, but more importantly to the readers of the *Confessions*. It demonstrates that God provides for those who follow him. Additionally, Monica’s ability to accept the answer as a “sound from heaven”²⁴ showcases her steadfastness in God’s hand in her life. This is an ability she possesses throughout the *Confessions*, and Augustine writes about it to demonstrate to the readers what true faith looks like. A mother torn apart by anxiety over her son’s soul was able to take the word of Ambrose as Truth and follow it faithfully. This is an attribute of Monica for the people of the fourth century and beyond to digest. If Monica can have a hand in her son’s salvation, then surely fellow Catholics of similar devotion can do the same.

Monica’s ability to resign her anxieties and be open to receiving the grace of God goes beyond the act of motherly love: it is a demonstration of true and steadfast faith. As a North African woman, Monica was accustomed to many traditions blending Catholic doctrine with African pagan practices. One of these traditions was leaving bread and wine to “certain oratories built in the memory of saints.”²⁵ On one occasion, a sacristan prevented her from leaving the wine, and she learned that the bishop, “Ambrose, had forbidden the practice.”²⁶ Rather than protest a practice she held deep tradition in, she “received the prohibition so devoutly and obediently.”²⁷ Augustine recalls that her concern “was piety” and not the pleasure of the tradition of “wine-drinking.” He emphasizes that his mother was not in “hatred of the truth, like so many of both sexes who are much sickened by a hymn of sobriety as drunkards would be.”²⁸ Augustine displays his mother as a woman who was able to abandon her

²² Augustine, 3.11.20.

²³ Clarissa W. Atkinson, “‘Your Servant, My Mother,’” 143.

²⁴ Atkinson, 143.

²⁵ Augustine, *Confessions*, 6.1.1.

²⁶ Augustine, 6.1.1.

²⁷ Augustine, *Confessions*, 6.2.1.

²⁸ Augustine, 6.2.2.



traditions without resentment. She did this because it was God's will and, as a devout Catholic woman, she was "fervent in spirit and ever doing good."²⁹ To place God's will above one's own is a trait all good Catholics are called to follow. Augustine credits his mother's role as an unwitting agent of the divine will. This story is a testament that even the most devout can experience conversions. To Augustine, salvation was a never-ending journey that Catholics should constantly pursue. Augustine acknowledges her role in his conversion and credits his journey to the watchful eye of God and the passionate prayers of Monica. It was her tears and "fervent spirit" that propelled him onto the path of righteousness.

Monica's life revolved around Augustine's journey to salvation, and her death holds immense value to his journey in the *Confessions*. Monica lives to see Augustine convert, but her story ends soon after his salvation with a poetic conclusion. Her entire life as presented through the *Confessions* led to the moment of Augustine's conversion, so it appears appropriate her story ends at the apex of his. Upon her death, Augustine spends the remainder of book nine outlining her timeline separate from his own. Her history and life before Augustine's paints a wider picture of who Monica was in her heart, the heart that "[God] alone could see."³⁰

Augustine begins by outlining her tumultuous relationship with his father, Patricius, despite her devotion to "serve him as her lord."³¹ She "bore his unfaithfulness quietly," as he was a pagan, and never grew jealous, despite the attitudes of complaints many other women displayed regarding their husbands' similar behaviors.³² Monica was sympathetic towards other women who expressed discontent in their marriages, but rather than join in their complaints, she offered "serious advice" and reminded them that they should "remember their condition and not proudly withstand their masters."³³ Despite her own position within a loveless marriage, she remained steadfast in her vows to her husband. This steadfastness is paralleled in her commitment to God.

Augustine continues by proudly exclaiming that his mother's advice was met with admiration from other wives. "Knowing what a violent husband she had to put up with," the other wives reassessed their own marriages and took her opinion with grace. After his *Confessions*, Augustine would write letters of advice to married women with the same opinion and grace his mother displayed. Her patience was something Augustine believed other women would benefit from.³⁴ Augustine's commitment to

²⁹ Augustine, 6.2.2.

³⁰ Augustine, 8.6.15.

³¹ Augustine, 9.9.19.

³² Augustine, 9.9.19.

³³ Augustine, 9.9.19.

³⁴ Cooper, "Augustine and Monica."



Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies

sharing Monica's wisdom with the Catholic community reveals his belief that she was a model of perfect Christianity. Augustine continues and recalls his mother was a "peacemaker between people quarreling and minds at discord."³⁵ Monica was, above all things, peaceful and ventured beyond the bounds of human nature. While this might seem a small virtue, Augustine comments that his mother's ability to always place peace and compassion above the horrible wide spreading of sin, in this case gossip, was admirable to the highest degree. He credits God with being the master who taught her the "school of her heart" and was the foundation to her goodness.

Ultimately, Augustine is acknowledging God's love within his mother—the highest compliment from a man consumed with understanding and pleasing God. Augustine's impression was that Monica's advice was useful to those women who took it to heart and "were grateful for it."³⁶ He continues to testify his mother's life by recalling her belief about the meaning of her life. These words were expressed in a comment she made during her final days in Ostia. Monica admitted to Augustine that she no longer found

joy in anything in this world. What I am still to do here and why I am here I know not, now that I no longer hope for anything from the world. One thing there was, for which I desired to remain still a little longer in this life, that I should see you a Catholic Christian before I died. This God granted me in superabundance. What then am I doing here?³⁷

Monica's ultimate purpose in this world, according to her own heart, was to see her son become a Catholic. Augustine's conversion of heart was all she desired to obtain from her life, a life she claims was fulfilled in "superabundance" by the Creator. Her peace with death lies in her accomplishment of her life's goal and her complete understanding that God was behind it all. Even on her deathbed, she acknowledged that Augustine's conversion was all she ever desired, and her faith rested in the arms of God. She renounced her own wish to be buried in her hometown beside her husband, confident that God would "know where to find me when he comes to raise me to life at the end."³⁸ Augustine's mother was a virtuous, patient, peacemaker who was obedient to ecclesiastical authority. She was never concerned with her own comfort or security and was intensely focused on her mission. Her trusted faith in God was one Augustine admired and credited with the discovery of his own faith. Her faith inspired him, and through the *Confessions*, was designed to inspire others.

³⁵ Augustine, *Confessions*, 9.10.21.

³⁶ Augustine, 9.9.19.

³⁷ Augustine, 9.10.26.

³⁸ Augustine, 9.11.27.

Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies

Volume 6, Issue 1, May 2023

Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles



Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies

Monica played a crucial role in Augustine's conversion and continues to inspire Augustine's readers to pursue a life similar to hers. In life, she was a proponent for Augustine's salvation, and Augustine tells her story to promote the conversion of others. She was a representative of Christians whose faith was not accessible by philosophers or famous theologians of the time. She was a vehicle of illumination, blessed with the gift of visions and insight, to aid in the conversion and Catholic exploration of the general medieval Christian. She was a woman, a mother, a widow, and most importantly to Augustine, a Catholic who would serve as an exemplary model of Catholic excellence. Her life was one Augustine imitated and was determined to provide to others as a source of inspiration.

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Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies

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